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Interview

with

JOSEPHUS L. MAVRETIC

November 15, 1995

by Joseph Mosnier

Indexed by Joseph Mosnier

The Southern Oral History Program  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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SOHP Series: The North Carolina Politics ProjectTAPE LOG -- JOSEPHUS L. MAVRETIC

Interviewee: JOSEPHUS LYMAN ["JOE"] MAVRETIC

Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier

Interview Date: Nov. 15, 1995

Location: Raleigh, NC

Tape No.: 11.15.95-JM (cassette 1 of 1)  
(approximate total length 90 minutes)

**\*\*NB:** This first session primarily treats events through the early 1980s. See also the second interview session of Nov. 30, 1995.\*\*

**Topic:** An oral history of Joe Mavretic, who served in the NC House from 1980 through 1994, and was Speaker during the 1989-90 Session after successfully leading a rump group of 20 disgruntled Democrats and the House's 45 GOP members in a revolt against the established Democratic leadership. Mavretic was born July 29, 1934, in Powell's Point, Currituck County, NC; was reared in Elizabeth City and Havelock where he attended the public schools; graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill in 1956; and thereafter served until 1977 as a Marine Corps fighter pilot, seeing extensive duty in the Vietnam War. In the late 1970s Mavretic, having retired from the military, moved to Tarboro, NC, from whence in 1979 he began a career in electoral politics. After successful 1980 Democratic primary campaign, Mavretic was appointed by Gov. Jim Hunt to fill a House vacancy; Mavretic then won a seat in the general election later that fall, the first of seven consecutive successful races for the House. He lost his seat to a challenger in Nov. 1994.

Substantively, the interview was organized around several major themes: his personal biographical history; details of his decision to run for the House and his campaign tactics; his political ideology; and his early experiences in the early 1980s in the House. The interview proceeds through these matters in roughly chronological fashion. Other more recent matters are included in the second interview session conducted Nov. 30, 1995.

**Subject Headings:** North Carolina Politics & Government; Transportation Policy and Finance in North Carolina; North Carolina Democratic Party; Jim Hunt; Liston Ramsey; Martin Nesbit; Race and Politics in North Carolina; Poverty and Industrial Wages in North Carolina.

**Comments:** Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

*\* Restricted - researcher must obtain interviewee's permission to quote from interview*

TAPE INDEX

Counter Index   Topic

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side A -- Tape No. 11.15.95-JM]

- 001            [Opening announcement.]
- 008            Biographical information: birth in Currituck Co. on July 29, 1934; family history; childhood after his father's death in 1939 and trials of not having a father; mother's remarriage and move to Havelock, NC; high school in New Bern, NC, 1948-52; early dreams to be a Marine Corps fighter pilot and then a lawyer; experiences at UNC-Chapel Hill and key mentors; dissatisfaction with limited faculty contact and attention while at Chapel Hill.
- 133            Entry into the Marine Corps; training and work experiences; enthusiasm for flying and decision to re-enlist; service in Vietnam; return to the US, divorce, and subsequent professional experience in the Marine Corps, including receipt of a master's degree and command of a fighter squadron; retirement from Marine Corps.
- 189            Remarriage and move to Tarboro, NC, in 1978; early involvement in local political squabble concerning the state House districting pattern for that area; details of first campaign in 1979-80 for House seat; strategy employed to win sufficient support, including three months of barnstorming all the country stores in the district.
- 339            His political concerns at the time, including his belief that the overriding issue for the remainder of the century was excessive centralization of political power in Washington.
- 389            His sense that he has consistently been six to ten years ahead of his time politically, and the political costs of such a posture.
- 398            His Vietnam War experiences did not shape his political views; he was simply a professional soldier doing his job in the War; his regret that the Marine Corps did not have a major role in the air war over North Vietnam which prevented him from engaging MIG fighter jets in combat.
- 429            Impact of wife's family connections on his political fortunes in the district: helped with the social and economic elite, and hurt with working class and poor voters.
- 455            The key issue in his 1980 House race was the local districting/representation issue; his belief that in any given campaign a candidate needs one to three clearly defined issues to run on; his conviction that he built a reputation for personal integrity during his years of public service.



- 498 His expectation in 1980 that his "confrontational," "aggressive," "no-nonsense" political style would generate sufficient backlash that he would likely only survive six to ten years in the political arena.
- 543 His costs campaigning in 1980 for the House were a little more than \$35,000, more than was spent by any other candidate for the state House in that year; how he borrowed the money and against his expected salary during the two-year term and also raised some other funds with a \$25 donor limit.
- 592 Details of the maneuverings concerning the possibility of an appointment by Gov. Jim Hunt to a House vacancy subsequent to Mavretic's second-place finish in the 1980 primary.
- 650 [End of Side A.]

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side B -- Tape No. 11.15.95-JM]

- 004 Continuing discussion of his race in 1980 for the NC House and appointment to the Short Session of 1980; the "half session" appointment gave Mavretic more seniority than the class that entered during the regular session of 1981, which proved an important development.
- 030 Mavretic's first "big mistake" "on the eighth day" of the 1980 short session where Mavretic, yet unknown to the Senate leadership, inserted himself forcefully into a joint hearing to the dismay of the leadership; how this episode caused many members to judge Mavretic a "smart ass" and how this reputation persisted among members, though lobbyists and press corps recognized that Mavretic might be worth extra watching.
- 072 Mavretic's extensive effort to study and master the NC budget during the summer of 1980 after the close of the 1980 Short Session; his decision to focus on "where the money comes from" and become well versed in state finance; how this effort gave him far more expertise in this regard than most other members of the General Assembly; his further effort to study the state's transportation/highway policy, and his preparation and distribution of three papers on this issue including proposals for policy.
- 136 His appointment by Speaker Liston Ramsey during the 1981 Session to the Finance, Transportation, and Agriculture Committees; Mavretic's opposition to a new gasoline tax proposal as insufficient to address the state's needs; how he worked with Rep. Charlie Holt to oppose the gas tax bill, only to see Billy Clark, an ally in this effort, capitulate under last-moment pressure from the leadership and throw a close vote to the supporters, and how this episode was a tough early lesson for Mavretic in the ways of the legislature and state politics; negative impact of this episode on Mavretic's relationship with Jim Hunt.
- 276 Discussion of the NC Democratic Party ca. 1980-81; the Party had done nothing to help Mavretic in his 1980 race, and how insiders worked against his

appointment by Hunt in 1980; Mavretic's view that the Party insiders favored strong liberals; Hunt's domination of the Party in those years and Hunt's inside political circle including Phil Carlton and Joe Pell.

- 330 Mavretic's relationship, during his first several terms, with Hunt was "distant"; Mavretic's belief that members of the legislature should not grow too close to the executive branch; some members of Hunt's circle disliked Mavretic and were vindictive, but Mavretic was "small potatoes" to the view of a figure as powerful as Jim Hunt was in those years.
- 358 Mavretic's earliest inklings in the early 1980s that the Democratic Party's base was beginning to erode.
- 390 Mavretic's effort to learn the important regional variation in state politics, and his effort, for example, to visit every member of the legislature in his or her home district to get a feel for local politics and concerns.
- 417 Race as a political issue in North Carolina: "the race problem has not played out," is "in the middle of everything political in NC and is going to get worse before it gets better"; details of Mavretic's view of race as a factor in NC politics, including how race is used politically in eastern NC as a wedge to separate poor whites from blacks and how the issue shapes and controls politics in the east (whereas in western NC there are relatively few blacks and race is "not a significant political issue").
- 474 NC's fundamental handicap of an insufficiently educated/skilled citizenry: "The basic problem in this state is that we have a lot of people who do not have sufficient skills to trade for a decent living. That is NC's Achilles heel. And until we change that nothing is going to get much better. Jim Hunt is right...when he talks about schools" though he and others fail to appreciate how the state's university system has been favored to the detriment of K-12 public schools, largely to make a "poor and ignorant state" with scarce resources "look good" and to assist the children of the privileged.
- 557 Mavretic's regret that he never chaired the Finance Committee, the one role he coveted above all others; his conviction that increasing the state's average wage by one dollar per hour would do more to help the state's fortunes than the whole range of "penny ante programs" and how he would have liked to use that platform to launch an effort to raise the state's average wage.
- 588 How textile, furniture, animal processing and other industries in NC have resisted wage increases and used their political clout to ensure low wages; Mavretic's view that attracting low wage industry to NC actually undermines rather than advances the state's economic health; how politicians fail to see NC's interests in a "macro sense" to the detriment of the state's fortunes.
- 670 [End of first session. See also the session of 11/30/95 for further discussion of state political history with Joe Mavretic.]